

JESUS:
A
CHRISTMAS SERMON,

PREACHED

In the UNITARIAN CHURCH, Montreal,

ON

CHRISTMAS DAY, 1851,

By JOHN CORDNER.

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"Let therefore our chiefest endeavour be, to meditate upon the life of Jesus Christ."—*De Im. Christi, C. 1.*

"Whosoever would fully and feelingly understand the words of Christ, must endeavour to conform his life wholly to the life of Christ."—*De Im. Christi, C. 1.*

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JESUS: A CHRISTMAS SERMON.

"Thou shalt call his name Jesus."—Matthew i. 21.

EIGHTEEN centuries and a half have now elapsed since the birth at Bethlehem. And, as our custom is, we have come here to-day—the day set apart by the common consent of Christendom as the anniversary of that birth—to offer grateful praise to God for the unspeakable gift which it brought to our world. Heralded by heaven came the divinely sent child, and the simple shepherds from the fields of Judea, and well skilled sages from afar, alike came to his humble birthplace to do him reverence. His meek and saint-like mother treasured the utterances which were put forth concerning him, and, with a solicitude known only to herself, pondered them in the depths of her heart. She felt the hand of the Lord with her in giving her this child, and she had forebodings of his future career, such as few others had. The aged Simeon, spared to see his day, rejoiced, and told his mother that he was "set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel." Yes, and he told her also that "a sword should pierce her own soul through;" but Mary then scarcely wist the sad meaning of this saying. The son grew in tranquil beauty by his mother's side, and at twelve years of age gave indications of an aim at once lofty and peculiar. He took his place among the doctors of the temple, heard their discoursing, and asked them questions, all the while kindling their astonishment by his own understanding and

answers. Heaven-sent child! He was attending to his Father's business. So he told his mother, when she and her husband sought him sorrowing.

We hear nothing more of him, save that he "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man," until he was about thirty years of age. Then he came forth to preach, and submitted to baptism of John in the Jordan. At his baptism special testimony was borne to his person. From the heavens the Spirit of God descended upon him visibly, and from on high came a divine utterance, pronouncing him the "beloved Son" of God. Now we know that he is the Messiah—the long promised Messiah—publicly designated by God himself. Now he enters on his mission, and scatters broadcast that precious seed of truth which was to redeem and sanctify humanity, and change the face of the world. Never man spake as he did. Never man lived as he did. Never man died as he did. Never man rose as he did. He stood on the earth peculiar and alone. Tempted like those around him, yet without sin. Clothed in flesh, yet arrayed in heavenly glory. He stood before God as his well-beloved Son and Messenger. He stood before man as his Saviour and Redeemer.

He stood before man as his Saviour, I say. We have an indication of this in the name which was given to him. His name should be called Jesus, it was said, because he should save his people from their sins. And so was his name called. Jesus was not an uncommon name among the Hebrews. It has an equivalent in the term Joshua, and signifies Saviour. But, in the case of Jesus our Lord, it had a peculiar and exalted meaning. Having direct reference to man's sins, it took a more comprehensive sweep, and touched a far higher range of relations, than were ever indicated in any other case. In the case of the Lord Christ it reached into the spiritual realm, and embraced those relations which the soul sustains to God.

"Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins."—Salvation from sin; this is Christian salvation. It is not from a single passage merely that we learn this, but from the current language of the New Testament. "Behold the Lamb of God," said the Baptist, "who taketh away the sin of the world." "God having raised up his Son, Jesus," said the Apostle Peter, "sent him to bless you in turning every one of you from his iniquities."

"Christ gave himself for us," writes St. Paul, "that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works." The work of the Lord Jesus is commonly spoken of in the New Testament as a work of cleansing and regeneration. Man stands before God defiled by sin, and, through this, alienated from heaven. Jesus was manifested to put away the defilement, to restore in the human soul the divine image which it had lost, and thus to effect a reconciliation, and establish a harmony, between man and his Maker. Standing in this way, and for this purpose, between a holy God and sinful men, he is the Mediator, through whom we receive the atonement, for atonement, as you know, means reconciliation.

Sin is the great plague of humanity. It eats like a canker into the life of the individual and the race. It vitiates its entire spirit and aim, destroys its proper happiness, and overthrows its highest hopes. So thoroughly is this the case, that the sinful man is justly pronounced dead—morally and spiritually dead—"dead in trespasses and sins." It enters the soul like a malignant poison, blights its most hopeful powers, and kills out, or keeps out, the life of God which ought to be there. The Holy Spirit, which comes from God, will not abide in a temple defiled and desecrated by sin. Yet we are strangely indifferent to it. So much are we accustomed to it, that we have long since ceased to look upon it with that abhorrence which it merits. We are ourselves sinful, sinfulness prevails everywhere around us, and our moral vision is injured. It is neither pure nor perfect, else we should regard every aspect of sin with pain and dread. Proper reflection must always lead us so to regard it. It is the root of all the unhappiness which prevails so extensively in the world. Man has been, and continues to be, untrue to his highest interests, and he suffers accordingly. Do I see a brow clouded with discontent, and hear the language of complaint constantly from the tongue? It is the effect of sin. The man has fixed his love too deeply on the things which minister to the gratification of the passing hour, and when these fail him his felicity is marred. His spirit is out of harmony with the Spirit of God, and when the objects of his earthly desire are disturbed or withdrawn, his soul is sorely troubled. The gods whom he worshipped have been cast from their places, or carried away, and like the idolatrous man of old, his language, in effect, is, "What have I more?" Do I observe distrust depicted on the countenance, in the ordinary intercourse of man with his fellow-man? It is the effect of sin. Truth

has been largely abandoned, and sincerity to a great extent forsaken. Falsehood has been found to serve the short-sighted purpose of the hour, and men have become false and insincere. Hence throughout a great portion of human intercourse, men feel that they are not to be mutually relied on. Selfishness disturbs the balance of virtue, and where self-interest is supposed to interfere, it is held peculiarly necessary to be cautious in extending our confidence. A current maxim of worldly prudence enjoins us to suspect every one. I do not dispute its aptness in the present condition of society. But, surely, it is not a maxim calculated to augment the ease or happiness of him who holds it, and acts upon it. To proceed upon the idea that we are surrounded by falsity and insincerity, is like making a journey in doubtfulness and the dark. We are always subject to uneasiness and alarm. It is in the broad sunlight of truth and rectitude alone, that we can have that confidence which brings felicity and cheerfulness. Do I perceive a face in which the traces of suffering are visible—where the marks of unspoken pain are legibly drawn? This, too, is the effect of sin. The rightful sovereignty of reason and conscience has been overthrown in that soul. These have been cast from their place of eminence, and some wild passion, or ill regulated desire, has assumed sway. But conscience will not readily acquiesce in such a usurpation. She puts forth her remonstrances, solemn, startling, and sharper than any two edged sword. Her utterances are given with the sanction of heaven upon them, and they make themselves heard and felt. Hence an inward warfare is established, painful above all others to him who is the subject of it. The voice of conscience, to-day asserting the right, leads him to make resolutions, which the power of passion, ruling in the wrong, induces him to break on the morrow. The pain felt in such trials none can understand, save those who experience it. It robs the soul of serenity and peace, and, however concealed, will inscribe its sad characters on the outward man. The happy and contented spirit assumes a happy and contented expression, which the vexed spirit, stung by its own sins, or borne down by earthly cares, can never make its own. At the bottom, then, of all human discontent, and complaining, and distrust, and suffering, lies sin. This is the root of all the evils which afflict our race. This, the source of all our real misery.

An exception may be taken to some of these remarks, founded on common observation. It may be said that many men who are avow-

edly careless of all that pertains to God, and the soul's highest welfare, are not visited with discontent, nor with any distrust which disturbs them, nor with any inward pain which shows itself. The language of the Bible even may be cited, that "the wicked are not in trouble, as other men are." Examples may be pointed out of persons who are easy, and contented, and cheerful, whilst they lead lives notoriously selfish and sinful. Now, in such cases, it would be idle to deny that a happiness exists. But what is its character and extent? What can be its character, seeing that its existence obviously depends on the deadness of the higher sentiments? What can be its extent, when earthly elements, only, enter into it? If truth, rectitude, love, piety, and divine communion were understood and appreciated, its very existence were impossible, for there could be no felicity where these were not respected. Such happiness, then, must be low in its character, and contracted in its extent. I will not say that it is precisely similar in kind to the enjoyment of the lower animals, for many qualities enter into it which are unknown to them. But, assuredly, it does not stand as far *above* this, as it does *below* the felicity which springs from faithfulness to the highest laws of our being, and to the heavenly disclosures which have been made to us. He who is loyal to conscience and to God—who cherishes in his soul the love of truth, purity, and goodness—who seeks, by the holy offices of devotion, to keep his spirit in communion with Christ, and with the infinite Father—who puts forth all his powers, and seeks the help of the Highest, to arise to the true dignity of his nature, and reach the heavenly destiny set before him—enjoys a happiness of which the negligent, the selfish, and the wicked man can have no conception in his condition of moral blindness and spiritual deadness. The sinful man has, by the fact of his sinfulness, limited his capacity for happiness. The avenues through which the purest bliss comes to the soul are in him obstructed and closed. The animal man receiveth not divine things. They are foolishness unto him. He cannot understand or enjoy the blessedness which comes therefrom, any more than the deaf man can draw inspiration from music, or the blind man derive delight from the beauty of color. Now, in this very circumstance, we have farther evidence of the great evil and deep malignity of sin. It undermines the foundations of man's true happiness, and then blinds his eyes to the tremendous injury it has inflicted on him. It makes a wreck of all that is high and holy in his nature, and be-

trays him into a base contentment with the ruin. It robs him of the only bliss worthy an immortal being, and imposes a poor and perishing counterfeit in its stead.

It was from the power of this evil that Jesus came to deliver us. This is the arch adversary—the Satan of the human race—whose dominion the Lord Christ came to overthrow. Who has not witnessed, and felt, the power of this tormentor? Look abroad upon the world, ancient and modern, and behold it written in characters of fire, and blood, and woe, and desolation. Let any thoughtful and discerning man look within, and contemplate the condition of his own soul, and he will speedily discover its blasting effects. Alas! we do not require to force such introspection. Too frequently the painful experience of the human heart reveals these sad effects to us. The emptiness and uneasiness of spirit which we experience, even when the cup of earthly possession is full,—the felt want, and yearning, and sadness of heart, which come upon us, even where there is no bitter remorse for flagrant sin,—all this is the result of our alienation from God. Thanks be to Infinite Mercy, none of the world's idolatries—not wealth, nor fame, nor fashion, nor pleasure—can fully satisfy the wants of the human soul. In our most thoughtful hours, these appear to us but shadows and semblances, not substance and reality. At such times we cannot rest on them—we dare not rest on them. With the awful mysteries of the soul's nature and destiny pressing upon us, our heart and flesh cry out for something else—they cry out for the living God.

And when this spiritual want is experienced, where shall we look for help? When this cry is made, where shall we look for the adequate response? To nature? Nature, indeed, is wondrous and beautiful, and is not slow to proclaim her Author. But she is deaf to the heart's deepest cry—she speaks no word of sympathy or help. The sun rises and sets, the stars glisten and are hid again, the tides ebb and flow, summer and winter alternate—all this by virtue of fixed laws. But these laws bring no healing to the human heart, sick through sin. Nature, then, cannot give the needed help. Shall we look to the Mosaic economy? Here we see law again, though of another order; yet law still, fixed, inflexible, through which man may obtain a *knowledge* of sin, but no redemption from its power. Nor is its ritualism more effective. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins, and give the required relief. The more conscientious

we are in our efforts to fulfil all righteousness, the more clearly do we discern how far we fall short. We feel our inability to meet all legal requirements, condemnation hangs over us, and we can see no way of escape. Looking at his case in the light of law, Paul felt himself wretched and dead. No relief, then, can be found here. Where, then, shall we look? I answer:—to Jesus, the Saviour.

It is Jesus, only, who meets the wants of sin-stricken humanity. He comes from the bosom of Infinite Love and places himself in close and sympathetic relation with our race. His language is—“Come unto me all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” All man’s unrest and misery spring, as I have already said, from sin—from a vitiated state of mind and heart. Through this, he stands alienated from God, and is placed at variance with him. The work of Jesus, as Saviour, is to act upon the mind and heart, to remove the vitiating element which is the cause of alienation and variance, and reconcile the creature and the Creator. He stands Mediator between the two parties. His covenant is a new one. The malady is of a moral and spiritual kind, and salvation from it is to be accomplished by moral and spiritual means.

Jesus brings us a new revelation of the character of God. No longer is he known only as a distant and indistinct sovereign, as in nature. No longer is he enveloped in the smoke and cloud of Sinai, as in the Jewish dispensation. His glory now shines in the face of Jesus Christ. He, the only begotten Son, in close confidence with the Father—he hath declared him as he was never declared before. Through Jesus, we see the Almighty condescending to enter into visible contact with our race. And this for the purpose of saving it. For the Infinite God himself is our Saviour primarily. The method of salvation originated in God’s love. Jesus was the visible Saviour to the race, for he was the visible representative of the invisible Jehovah, and his Messenger in the great work of gospel mercy. The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. And so truly did the Son reveal the character of the Father, that whosoever saw the Son saw the Father—that is, they saw all of the Father that they could see. The infinite and invisible God, in himself too vast for human comprehension, was brought close to the hearts and apprehension of men, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. Through Jesus he sought to touch the living springs of affection in man, and draw his sinful

offspring towards himself. In this way did the Lord seek to save those who were lost, and restore them to the heavenly household and communion.

Man was impotent to save himself. Neither by natural law, nor by law revealed, could he accomplish his own salvation. Sin had sapped the true life from his soul, and impaired its powers. Understanding, will, affections—all were damaged. Nothing but a fresh infusion of divine life could repair the damage, and save the world. And this must come from God. It must come of God's grace, or fatherly favor, and not of human claim, for no such claim existed. It is the free gift of Infinite Mercy, and came through Jesus. He was the divine Word incarnate, and the fullest expression of the life of God that ever appeared in flesh. "In him was life," saith St. John, "and the life was the light of men." "By his life we shall be saved," writes St. Paul. By the power of this life he came to quicken a world dead in trespasses and sins. As by following in the track of the first Adam all had fallen and died, so by looking unto Christ, the last Adam, all may rise and live.

His work was one of reconciliation, and he was himself the visible symbol of his work. Jesus was the grand symbol of reconciliation. God and man, hitherto apart, and at variance, are seen united in him. In him we see the divine flowing into the human, and the human, standing clear of sin, coalescing with the divine. Jesus was the Divine Man. He declares that he and the Father are one. The veil of separation is broken, and the Man of Nazareth and the infinite God are in intimate spiritual union. He calls on his disciples to join him in a like union, and through him to become one with God, as he was. His prayer to this effect thrilled through their hearts at his last earthly meeting with them in Jerusalem, and it has vibrated through the hearts of true believers everywhere, and in all ages since. "Holy Father," he prays, "keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word, that they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they all may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one." The divine life is in him, not as in a shut cistern, but as

in a flowing stream. His own figure conveys the best idea of the mode. "I am the vine," he says, "ye are the branches." By abiding in him, as the branches in the vine, the true disciples partake of the divine life, and are affiliated to the Father—to "his Father and their Father, his God and their God." They receive the adoption of sons. The spirit of Christ passing into their hearts, and becoming life of their life, they, too, can cry Abba, Father. "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God."

Am I asked to pencil off the lines of this divine life, and give palpable demonstration how it proceeds? I make no such attempt. All life is to me a mystery. While I write, a plant grows at my side. It has put forth a new leaf which is becoming larger every day by virtue of the life that is in it. But that life is to me inscrutable. I brush away the moth which is fretting the garment. I see that it lives, but its life is to me equally inscrutable. And if the life of the plant or insect is beyond my explanation, much more must the higher life of God be. This I can say; that *it is*. The Scriptures assure us of this. And the deepest experience of the saints of our race has confirmed the assurance.

Christ, the Saviour, has been mercifully offered to our acceptance. God has graciously opened up a way of reconciliation and salvation through him. Jesus meets a want of humanity which neither natural, nor moral, nor ceremonial law could ever meet. He came from the bosom of Infinite Love, and entered into sympathetic relation with our race. God speaks peace through him. Yet man is placed under conditions. The mercy of God has furnished the means of salvation, but man must use the means if he would reach the result. What shall we do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We must apprehend him by the contact of a living faith. A barren assent of the understanding will not do. The formal acceptance of a conventional creed will not do. Nothing short of a living faith will do—a faith coincident with a spiritual appreciation of Jesus, and resulting in love and reverence towards him. This faith, touching the springs of the affections, will work by love. Its fruits will be felt in the thought, and seen in the life. By this faith are we saved.

This faith involves and signifies the full acceptance of Christ, as he is made known to us, and the faithful use of all the means and in-

fluences which he has placed within our reach. He is revealed to us as our Teacher, our Example, the Lord crucified, the rising Lord, and the Lord ascending and glorified. The word of truth which he taught, carries a cleansing and sanctifying power. Obedience thereto purifies the soul. The influence of his holy and benevolent life hath a saving effect upon us. The sacrifice of his death was to put away sin. His resurrection, too, was for our justification and salvation. These are the direct statements of the New Testament.* What God hath joined together in this matter let not man put asunder. One portion, perhaps, may strike us with more force than another, according to our circumstances and temperament, but let us be wary in our enthusiasm, nor detach that portion from the rest as the only thing needful. Let us beware of detaching the life of Christ from his death, or his death from his life. Let us beware of running the comprehensive gospel which has been written by Evangelists and Apostles for our guidance, into the narrow mould of a conventional creed, and insisting on this partial gospel, as the gospel of salvation, instead of the full gospel of the Scripture. Rather let us receive the whole revealed Saviour, in humble waiting faith, and let us open our hearts to all the saving influences which come from his teaching, his life, his death, and his resurrection.

If we do this, we shall know, indeed, that Christ is a Saviour to us. If we sit at his feet, like the grateful Mary—if we follow him from place to place as he went about continually doing good—if, like the faithful and devoted women, we stand before his cross—if, like them too, we visit his bursted sepulchre,—if in our thought and life we carry him with us as our constant friend and counsellor,—his spirit and life will flow into our spirit and life, and we will become reconciled, and redeemed, unto God. By the power of this spirit we will be created anew—heart and life will be regenerated. Then will this earthly life have a new meaning for us. Through the working of this spirit we will be led to live for higher and diviner ends. And when this earthly existence comes to a close, Jesus will be found by the bed of the departing spirit, infusing consolation and hope, speaking of the place in his Father's mansions which he went before to prepare, pointing the path, and leading the way, to the heavenly inheritance.

* John xv. 3; xvii. 17. 1 Peter i. 22. Rom. v. 10. Heb. ix. 23. Rom. iv. 25. 1 Cor. xv. 17.

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23. Rom. iv.

Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift in Jesus ! He broke the power of sin, and took away the sting of death. It may be said, that, instead of resorting to the gospel method, God might, by a mighty miracle, have instantaneously redeemed the world from sin, and set his human offspring free of its power. But he is a wise Father as well as a loving one—a just God, as well as merciful. He would convince men of the sanctity of the divine law, and the weighty evil of transgression, by the magnitude of the method required to redeem. A Saviour is manifested—the well-beloved Son—sinless, yet suffering, and suffering on account of human transgression. Here is something to touch the heart and conscience, and move the sinner to penitence and return. And he calls on man to do his part in the great work—to work out his own salvation through the means which divine mercy has provided. Penitent and returning, he will receive him. This is the condition which God demands. Jesus disclosed the terms of reconciliation in his matchless parable of the prodigal son. Therein behold the method of atonement.

Thanks be to God, we say again, for his unspeakable gift in Jesus ! Are there any who slight the gift ? Men there were in a past age, and some there are in the present, who say that Christianity was before Christ. Their thought, here, is as shallow as their saying is paradoxical. Utterances of high moral and spiritual truth there were before the time of Jesus, both from Hebrew and Heathen, but there was no Christianity before Christ. Socrates and Seneca taught excellent morals, but Socrates and Seneca could not save the world.—They did not exemplify the life of God upon the earth, and set forth his love and mercy to men. What mark have they left upon the world compared with that of the Man of Nazareth ? Christianity before Christ ! Sunlight before the sun.

The mists rolled away when the star of Bethlehem appeared.—The smoke and cloud of Sinai departed. The morning of a new era dawned upon the world. It is our privilege to live under the gospel dispensation. But do we search ourselves sufficiently to know what use we make of its gracious and saving disclosures ? Do we examine ourselves to understand whether its power, purity, and boundless love, are adequately felt and respected by us ? Ah, our hollow, frivolous, and useless lives would rise up, I fear, to condemn many of us. Jesus appeared as our Saviour—the bearer of God's message of mercy. He spoke his heavenly words, and wrought his

heavenly works, and lived his heavenly life upon the earth, yet here we are, living for low aims—earthly-minded, when we ought to be heavenly-minded. When I think of what the gospel would make us, if we only imbibed its holy truths aright—when I think of what we might *be*, all of us, young and old, and what we might *do*, if we had the spiritual Christ formed within us—when I think of the great and beautiful lives we might lead, fragrant with truth, wisdom, sympathy, holiness, and love, if we were only faithful to the message of Jesus—when I think of how such fidelity would surround the young with a moral beauty, lovelier and more lasting than the beauty of the stars, and of how it would surround the old with a glory brighter and more abiding than the glory of all earthly diadems—when I think of these things, and then think of what we *are*, and what we *do*, and for what we are living from day to day, I perceive a contrast sufficient to make angels weep. As year after year this Christmas season comes round with its solemnities and cheerful festivities, should we not reflect on these things? And if, on this day, we could resolve to look to Jesus as he was manifested, and earnestly study his divine life—if we could resolve henceforth to discard all hollowness, and selfishness, and frivolousness, and strive, with simple and devoted hearts, after that spiritual sympathy, or oneness, with him to which he has called us—if we could thus resolve, and steadfastly act upon the resolve, the Spirit of God would help our efforts, and we should speedily become new creatures in Christ, and this Christmas day would be a day worthy of remembrance through life, through death, and through eternity.

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